# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SUPERLEADER BEHAVIORS AND SITUATIONAL AND JOB CHARACTERISTICS VARIABLES: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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*This study examined the relationships between superleader behaviors (as described by Manz & Sims, 1990) and selected situational and job characteristics variables in self-managed work groups in a government-operated railway service. Based on a sample of 90 employees, the results indicated that in general, supervisors who are seen as trusting, encouraging innovative behaviors, fair, and who positively reinforce group members when they have performed their job well, contribute to the development of self-management leader behaviors of rehearsal, self-goal-setting, self-criticism, self-reinforcement, self-expectation and self-observation. In addition, fostering communication within the group, and allowing the group members to make work-related decisions, also enhances the movement toward self-management.*

In recent years, the concept of autonomous work groups has gained increasing interest (Stewart & Manz, 1995; Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Mohrman, Cohen & Ledford, 1995; Lawler, 1992; Hackman, 1986; Manz, 1986; 1990; 1992; Manz & Sims, 1980; 1990). Stemming from the concept of socio-technical systems developed by Emery & Trist (1969), autonomous work groups have been most recently utilized as a form of work system, particularly as pressures are being exerted on organizations to become more responsive to the competitive environment (Writon, 1991). Several hundred plants in the United States adopted a self-managing work design (Lawler, 1986; Walton, 1985) and more than a thousand moved towards a more participative design (Walton, 1985).

Autonomous work groups have a number of key characteristics. They consist of a small group of individuals (8-15) who (Jessup, 1990; Wall et. al., 1986) are generally responsible for

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completing a whole unit of work (Jonsson & Zank, 1985), performing a variety of tasks, and utilizing a number of skills which the group as a whole possesses. (Wall & Clegg, 1986). Job feedback is important to the work group so that variance from goal attainment can be controlled by group members within a defined work area boundary.

Although strong empirical evidence supporting the benefits of team structures is still evolving, several case studies, both within the United States and Europe, have proved that the implementation of autonomous work groups produces outcomes such as increased employee satisfaction, the opportunity for increased socialization in the workplace, increased autonomy, opportunity to learn new skills, and other benefits such as reduced absenteeism and turnover and increased performance and motivation (Cohen & Ledford, 1994; Verespej, 1990; Pearson, 1991; Pearce & Ravlin, 1987; Wall, Kemp, Jackson & Clegg, 1986). However, much of the research about the actual processes at work within autonomous work groups and their effects upon these outcomes have not provided answers as to why such phenomena occur. It may even be legitimate to say that in some cases proposed outcomes may not be linked to autonomous work groups, but to some other unacknowledged processes, suggesting the need for further research. The dearth of good research into this area has made it particularly difficult to evaluate the worth of such new systems. Although the concept of highly participative work designs that offer high levels of autonomy for individuals is intuitively attractive, the ultimate worth of these designs in terms of organizational outcomes requires further investigation.

**Autonomous Work Groups and the External Leader**

An important role in the autonomous work group concept that has received little attention in past research is the leader in the group. Little research exists on the external leader and its effect on the functioning of the group. The basic idea behind autonomous work groups portrays group members in total control over their work environment and responsibility for all tasks within their group. Researchers in the past often presumed that the role of external leader is redundant and, therefore, to be of little interest.

Some recent research (Manz & Sims, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1990; and Manz, 1992) looks at the role of external leaders as it impacts on the effectiveness of autonomous work groups and the changing nature of their own positions under autonomous work group settings. Far from becoming redundant, the research suggests that the external leader has moved away from the traditional roles of supervision and control to a highly facilitative style of management, much less direct but still essential for the effectiveness of the group.

Initially the term "external leader" might seem a misnomer since the basis of autonomous work groups is self-management -- this represents the ideal autonomous work group situation. In fact, the formal supervisor or manager continues to play a role in the functioning of almost all autonomous work groups. Leadership, when applied to autonomous work groups, describes

the idea of "a person who leads others to lead themselves" (Whitsett & Yorks, 1983). Termed the "Superleader" by Manz and Sims (1986), the idea of the formal leader in the autonomous work group system implies that the leader works towards making his or her own position eventually redundant through guiding the group towards total self-management. In contrast, transformational leadership focuses on the leader's ability to create a highly motivating and inspiring vision (Bass, 1990). The focus is on the leader's vision, and the leader represents the source of direction. Individuals are expected to commit to the vision and the leader. With the superleader, however, the focus is largely on the individuals in the team who become self leaders and in essence share power with the leader. The leader's job in this environment changes to one that helps followers to develop the necessary skills for work, especially self leadership (Manz & Sims, 1990).

Later work by Manz and Sims (1991) provides a basis upon which to evaluate leadership in the autonomous work setting. The recommended style of leadership, namely a "Superleader," reflects the basic requirements of autonomous work groups. According to Manz and Sims (1991), the Superleader engages in behaviors that help team members learn to lead themselves. Instead of inspiring workers by generating an attractive vision, Superleaders help members to recognize their own capacity for effective decision-making without the need for direct involvement by the leader. This research has revealed basic behaviors that Superleaders perform, which directly affect the level of self-management displayed by the team.

For example, Superleader behavior encourages self-reinforcement by team members. Through reinforcement of high levels of group performance, the Superleader encourages the group to recognize and appreciate actions that lead to effective performance. The Superleader supplies the group with sufficient information to allow the group to evaluate its own performance. Most of the behaviors enacted by Superleaders concern the internalization of the concepts of task responsibility and influence over organizational outcomes. In other words, the Superleader, through a subtle process of boundary control, helps the team feel responsible for its own outcomes and recognize intrinsic rewards in its own work setting. The Superleader supplies information and feedback as needed to permit the continuance of self-leadership behaviors. Through the selective use of legitimate criticism and rewards, the Superleader enforces self-leadership outcomes.

Team members are encouraged to be critical of their own performance. By learning to recognize faults in their work practice, members can gain increased knowledge of their work and recognize appropriate behaviors for group success. Not mentioned in the literature, although implicitly implied, is the need for the external leader to promote norms of behavior based on group aspects.

Since the primary goal of the Superleader is to improve the performance of group members through the development of their own self leadership capabilities, employee self- goal setting

is an important ingredient. The Superleader through coaching and modeling helps assist members to engage in the behavior of self-goal setting within the group, and helps them to effectively set specific challenging goals for themselves. Table 1 outlines a description of these behaviors.

**Table 1**

**Superleader Behaviors**

| Variables | Description |
|---|---|
| Encourages self-reinforcement | Leader encourages work group to be self-reinforcing of high work group performance. |
| Encourages self-criticism | Leader encourages work group to be self-critical of low group performance. |
| Encourages self-goal-setting | Leader encourages work group to set performance goals. |
| Encourages self-coordination | Leader encourages work group to monitor, be aware of and to evaluate performance level. |
| Encourages self-expectation | Leader encourages work group to have high expectations for work performance. |
| Encourage rehearsal | Leader encourages work group to over an activity and "think through" before actually performing the activity. |

Source: Manz and Sims (1987).

While the Superleader position is described as a leader who leads others to lead themselves (Manz & Sims, 1986), the inference is that the leader is moving toward becoming redundant or at least only influential in a minor way. It would be more suitable to express the role of the Superleader as a leader who teaches others to appreciate the effectiveness of self-leadership for both organizational and individual benefits, and who encourages group members to look at management in a different, though not necessarily less influential, way. The group's relationship with the Superleader changes from one of basic reliance for the designation of tasks, rewards and direction, to a subtler, though just as important, role of maintenance and facilitation. The group may not rely on him/her in terms of having to ask for desired input once self-leadership is established, but the Superleader evolves into a facilitator of group behaviors and acts as a

buffer between the group and the external environment by supplying information and resources to the team.

The concept of Superleadership is still a relatively unexplored one. While theories relating to the type of behaviors required of the Superleader are available, (Stewart & Manz, 1995; Manz & Sims, 1990; Cordery & Wall, 1985) there is very little research on the actual effects of a variety of situational and organizational variables on the various dimensions of Superleader behaviors. The purpose of this research study then, is to examine the relationship between Superleader behaviors and selected situational and job characteristics variables. Based upon the above discussion, various hypotheses are examined. However, due to the lack of research in these areas, literature support for the propositions is limited. Nevertheless, the exploratory nature of the research is designed to look at these untested hypotheses, and endeavors to discover the relationships between Superleader behaviors and those variables that are important for the effective functioning of autonomous work groups.

$H_1$: Trust, innovation training and recognition will be positively related to self- rehearsal.

A Superleader encourages group members to think about how they are going to undertake an assignment. In order for employees to be successful in doing this there must be trust between the Superleader and the group. The Superleader should also foster an environment where individuals are encouraged to find new ways to perform their work duties, and receive recognition for a job well done. In addition, in order for them to effectively perform their jobs they should also have the proper training.

$H_2$: Self-goal setting will be positively related to communication, team goal setting, team communication and innovation.

Since a main focus of the Superleader is to improve the performance of individuals within a team through the development of their own self-leadership capabilities, employee self-goal setting is a key element. The Superleader encourages group members to effectively set specific challenging goals for themselves. For this to happen, group members should be encouraged to find new ways to perform their jobs. Also there should be good communications between the Superleader and the group members and within the group itself so that team goals are effectively formulated.

$H_3$: Self-criticism will be positively related to innovation, decision making and autonomy.

One objective of Superleadership is to encourage constructive self-criticism as an important part of the transition to self-leadership (Manz & Sims, 1986). The major focus is to treat mistakes as learning opportunities. In order for group members to effectively undertake this function they require autonomy, and the authority and responsibility to take corrective action to

rectify mistakes or variations from set standards. They should also be encouraged to be innovative in the generation of solutions to correct work related problems.

$H_4$: Innovation, team training and trust will be positively related to self-reinforcement.

The purpose of self-leadership is to lead others to self-leadership. An essential ingredient is to teach group members how to reward themselves and to build natural rewards into their own work (Manz & Sims, 1986). This means that individuals need to have the freedom to perform their jobs as they see fit and in ways that they find most rewarding. In order for this to happen members need to be trained to perform their jobs and trust needs to exist between the leader and group members.

$H_5$: Self-Expectation will be positively related to trust, fairness, autonomy, job feedback, team participation and goal setting.

Facilitating positive expectations in group members is an important role of a Superleader. The role of a Superleader is to guide, excite and engage (Manz & Sims, 1984). Trust, fairness, providing autonomy, expressing confidence in the group members' abilities to extend their present level of competence, and providing support, encouragement and feedback are necessary to foster self-expectations among group members.

$H_6$: Innovation, communication and trust will be positively related to self-observation.

In the process of helping group members to lead themselves, the Superleader encourages them to be aware of and evaluate their own level of performance. For this to occur, there should be an environment where group members are encouraged to find creative ways to solve work related problems, and have the autonomy to make decisions regarding the performance of their job. It is also important that the leader provides information to solve problems and facilitates communication within the group.

## METHOD

### Site and Research Participants

The research was based upon data gathered from 18 maintenance groups from two divisions of Westrail, a government operated railway service that controls much of the railway system across the entirety of Western Australia. Maintenance along its extremely extensive system is undertaken by maintenance gangs who operate individually within different geographical divisions. Each group is assigned a particular portion of the system which they must maintain. Maintenance here, refers to a variety of scheduled duties ranging from laying

new tracks and upkeep of old sections, to unscheduled emergency work, such as derailments and repairs stemming from environmentally related damage. Each of these groups was engaged in similar tasks and in similar settings. Numbers of individuals within the teams varied from a low of 6 to a high of 15.

A total of 139 surveys were distributed in person by the author to the employees over a three-day period. They were instructed to return the completed surveys in a stamped sealed envelope to the central office where they were collected by the author. Ninety surveys were returned for a response rate of approximately 68%. All the respondents were male. Forty percent graduated from high school, 46% did not finish high school and two percent had taken some university courses.

**Measures**

*Supervision.* A slightly modified version of Decotiis and Koy's (1981) scales were used to measure various perceptions of the leader, including trust, recognition, fairness and innovation. Items were rated on a 7-point scale.

*Self-Leadership.* Self-leadership scores were obtained using the Self-Management Leadership Questionnaire developed by Manz and Sims (1987). The 22-item questionnaire is designed to test the extent to which leaders of autonomous work groups display typical Superleader behaviors. Items were rated on a 7-point scale.

*Communication and Decision-Making.* Communication was measured with an expectation scale developed by House and Rizzo (1972). Items were rated on a 7-point scale. Decision-making was measured by House and Rizzo (1972). Items were rated on a 7-point scale.

*Job Characteristics.* Modifications of the scale developed by Sims, Szilyagi and Keller (1976) to measure perceptions of specific job characteristics were used to measure autonomy. Items were rated on a 7-point scale.

*Team Functions.* Perceptions of team functions were assessed with scales developed by the Center for Effective Organizations. The scales measured team participation, training and goal setting. Items were rated on a 7-point scale.

**Analysis**

In order to test these hypotheses, a series of hierarchical regressions were carried out separately for each of the various dimensions of Superleader behaviors. Selected situational and job characteristics variables were separately regressed on each of the dimensions of Superleader behaviors.

## RESULTS

Table 2 presents the alpha values, means , standard deviations of the major variables in the study.

**Table 2**

**Alpha Values, Means and Standard Deviation of Wages Study Variables**

| | Alpha | M | S.D. |
|---|---|---|---|
| Sel/Self-Examination | 0.88 | 3.8 | 0.9 |
| Self-Reinforcement | 0.79 | 4.5 | 1.0 |
| Self-Criticism | 0.88 | 4.1 | 1.2 |
| Self-Goal Setting | 0.87 | 4.3 | 1.6 |
| Self-Expectation | 0.91 | 3.9 | 1.1 |
| Rehearsal | 0.92 | 3.8 | 1.4 |
| Decision Making | 0.71 | 4.5 | 1.0 |
| Autonomy | 0.83 | 4.1 | 1.6 |
| Recognition | 0.86 | 4.2 | 1.2 |
| Trust | 0.79 | 4.4 | 1.1 |
| Training | 0.86 | 4.7 | 1.7 |
| Team Communication | 0.75 | 4.7 | 1.5 |
| Fairness | 0.81 | 5.0 | 1.2 |
| Feedback | 0.82 | 4.2 | 1.5 |
| Team Participation | 0.82 | 4.5 | 1.7 |

The results of the hierarchical regression are presented in Table 3. Self-rehearsal was significantly predicted by recognition (beta = .32, $p < .00$), trust (beta = .29, $p < .00$), innovation (beta =.24, $p < .01$), and training (beta = .15, $p < .02$) Seventy-six per cent (adjusted $R^2$) of the variance was explained. Self-goal setting was significantly predicted by communication (beta = .18, $p < .00$), innovation (beta = .56, $p < .00$), team goal setting (beta = .33, $p < .04$). Sixty-eight per cent (adjusted $R^2$) of the variance in self-goal setting was explained. Decision making (beta =.23, $p < .00$), autonomy (beta =.22, $p < .02$), and innovation (beta = .68, $p < .00$) significantly predicted self-criticism. Thirty-five per cent (adjusted $R^2$) of the variance was explained. Self-reinforcement was significantly predicted by innovation (beta = .53, $p < .00$), trust (beta = .20, $p < .03$), and team training (beta =.20, $p < .00$). Sixty-three per cent (adjusted $R^2$) of the variance in self-reinforcement was explained. Supervisory fairness (beta = -.33, p <

.00), trust (beta = .65, $p < .00$) and team participation (beta =.50, $p < .00$) significantly predicted self-expectation. Fifty-six per cent (adjusted $R^2$) of the variance was explained. However, autonomy, feedback and team goal setting failed to enter the equation. Self-observation was significantly predicted by communication (beta = .21, $p < .00$), autonomy (beta =.15, $p < .00$) and innovation (beta = .74, $p < .00$). Fifty-eight per cent (adjusted $R^2$) of the variance in self-observation was explained.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, the relationship between the various dimensions of Superleader behaviors and selected situational and job characteristics variables were explored. The results indicated that in general, supervisors who are seen as trusting, innovative, fair, and who positively reinforce group members when they have performed their job well will contribute to the development of self-management leader behaviors of rehearsal, self-goal setting, self-criticism, self-reinforcement, self-expectations and self-observation. Enhanced feelings of trust result when group members feel that they are receiving a greater degree of responsibility and there is consequently a reduced need for the group to be controlled by the external leader. In addition, fostering communication within the group, and allowing group members to make work related decisions also enhances the movement towards self-management.

All the hypotheses were supported except for hypothesis five, ($H_5$) which was only partially supported. The results indicated that team participation, supervisory trust and fairness were all positively related to self-expectation ($H_5$); however autonomy and feedback did not enter the equation. With respect to feedback, it is possible that the job itself provided feedback and hence it was not required from the supervisor. It is also possible that the nature of the tasks did not offer significant variation to allow group members to exercise autonomy. The general tasks performed by the maintenance gangs, though diverse, are generally predictable and of reasonably low complexity. Hence, the perceived level of autonomy may not have had an influence on self-expectation, as group members are bounded by work constraints that cannot be altered by the supervisor.

## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

It is obvious that the Superleader style of management of autonomous work groups results in some positive beneficial outcomes. The overall theme of management in autonomous work groups would seem to be learning to use facilitating skills as opposed to controlling skills, and as such is fundamentally different from traditional views of leadership (Manyard & Sims, 1990). In fact, if organizations really want employees to develop into top performers, providing them with the autonomy and responsibility to be more in charge of themselves and their work is

essential. As Lawler (1986, 1992) indicates, this high involvement approach provides the most extensive involvement and ability for self-influence. It entails passing power, information, knowledge and rewards to the lowest levels of the organization. The logic is that if workers are going to care about the organization they need to know about, be able to influence, be rewarded for and have the knowledge and skills to contribute to the performance of the organization.

In work situations where self-managed work groups are used, it would be appropriate for management to develop an employment strategy that recognizes Superleader behaviors, and recruit individuals displaying these characteristics as external leaders for such groups. Westrail employs its trackmasters from within the ranks of gang members. Once hired, the trackmaster is placed in a probationary position for a period of six months. During this period of time it would be very advantageous for management to evaluate the new trackmaster's behavior for typical Superleader behaviors. By endeavoring to employ individuals displaying Superleader behaviors the organization is aided in its efforts to develop a culture that is conducive for the effective functioning of self-managed work groups.

Although there are several benefits accruing from this type of management system, the environment in Australia is not particularly encouraging, and some of the necessary conditions for success are not currently present nor widespread. One of the required elements for the success of autonomous work groups is management support for the system (Lawler, 1992). If organizations want to obtain the maximum benefits that accrue from empowering workers, the focus should be not only in involving employees at all levels in decision making and problem solving, but it should also be integrated with a culture that supports and encourages this new system. Personnel policies should also be developed which support and reinforce this system.

While there is some tepid support for this type of structure from top management, the strong unions and the centralized wage systems are likely to have many constraining effects on the implementation of innovative structures such as self-managed work groups in both the private and public sectors. Under the present industrial system it is difficult to implement work structures that encourage informal task acquisition at work. Job classifications are such that there are limits to the extent workers may share or alternate tasks. Designation of tasks by the group are restricted by job boundaries. Union resistance to change in many industries acts as a major hindrance to the adoption of any major change for many companies (including Westrail) even though the benefits are self evident. Workplace reform in traditional fields requires active union support. Lack of this support is quite often due to the fact that unions lack knowledge about less traditional forms of work practices. This may, however, be overcome through comprehensive training and education of unions. Awareness of programs which promote the effectiveness of self-managed work groups, and the benefits of improved quality of work life that are purported to result from this system are essential if organizational structures that cut across organization boundaries to enhance co-ordination, communication and cooperation are to become part of new work cultures.

**Table 3**

**Hierarchal Regression Results**

| Self - Referral | | | Self - Goal Setting | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Prediction/ Variables | Beta | P | Prediction/ Variables | Beta | P |
| Recognition | 0.32 | .00 | Communication | 0.18 | .00 |
| Trust | 0.29 | .00 | Innovation | 0.56 | .00 |
| Innovation | 0.25 | .01 | T. Goal Setting | 0.33 | .00 |
| T. Training | 0.15 | .02 | T. Communication | -0.16 | .04 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ = .76 | | | Adjusted $R^2$ = .68 | | |
| Self-Criticism | | | Self-Reinforcement | | |
| Prediction/ Variables | Beta | P | Prediction/ Variables | Beta | P |
| Decision Making | 0.23 | .00 | Innovation | 0.53 | .00 |
| Autonomy | -0.2 | .02 | Trust | 0.2 | .03 |
| Innovation | 0.68 | .00 | T. Training | 0.21 | .00 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ = .40 | | | Adjusted $R^2$ = .63 | | |
| Self - Expectation | | | Self - Observation | | |
| Prediction/ Variables | Beta | P | Prediction/ Variables | Beta | P |
| T. Participation | 0.5 | .00 | Communication | 0.21 | .00 |
| Trust | -.033 | .00 | Innovation | -0.15 | .03 |
| Innovation | 0.65 | .00 | T. Goal Setting | 0.74 | .00 |
| Adjusted $R^2$ = .56 | | | Adjusted $R^2$ = .58 | | |

In conclusion, implementation of effective self-leadership within teams is not an instantaneous process, but adopting a Superleader style may lead to effective work groups over

time. Therefore, continual study of this particular type of application will contribute greatly to the understanding and application of Superleadership principles in modern organizations. Further research is also needed to provide additional insights into those behaviors needed to effectively lead those who are supposed to lead themselves, as well as for badly needed guidelines for training external leaders of self-managed teams.

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